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D'Amato: CIA 'inept' in pope investigation

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato on a possible cover-up of the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II.

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, R-N.Y., recently returned here following a visit to Rome as part of the Helsinki Commission. While in Rome, he discovered that information regarding the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II was never forwarded to investigators in Rome, even though D'Amato says he gave that information to the CIA in October 1981. This apparent negligence on the part of the intelligence community prompted D'Amato to criticize publically the CIA for its handling of the matter, even suggesting that they may in fact be trying to cover up the truth for their own purposes.

The senator was interviewed by Washington Times columnist John Lofton.

Q: Sen. D'Amato, you charged the CIA, which is our intelligence agency, with covering up the facts in the plot to murder the pope. What is your evidence to support this very serious allegation?

A: I think what we find is a total lack of dedication in ascertaining the facts so that the public can make an informed judgment. In addition, we find in many instances misinformation that has been given out by various intelligence sources — the kind of information that has proved to be very discouraging to the Italian government and to those charged with carrying out this investigation.

Q: You, in effect, said that the CIA was engaging in a campaign of disinformation. What kind of disinformation?

A: Well, for example, when certain intelligence sources are used by the national media as their sources for indicating that Agca, and his reliability — Agca being the young Turk who attempted to assassinate the pope — that he was mentally deranged and that information is attributed to an intelligence source, a CIA source, that provokes, No. 1 — great consternation within the Italian intelligence community.

Q: Could you give us some more specifics? ... what has the CIA not done that it should have done and what would be an example of where, in addition to what you just said, the agency has put out information that was erroneous? Why in the world they want to cover up this crime?

A: Well, again, I don't believe that it's the official position, I don't believe it's the position that comes from, let's say, CIA Director William Casey. I've spoken to the director and I am convinced of their good intentions but I think we have certain operatives in the field who have engaged in this kind of speculation with respect to the integrity of the Italian investigation and I could give you a number of instances.

Q: You, in effect, accused Casey of at least being negligent or not pursuing these leads you say exist. You also met with him. How did you get along after making that allegation?

A: Well, I think that the director is doing all in his power at this time. I came away with a sense that this matter has been discussed at the highest levels. I also understand why the CIA may not want to be out front. I don't believe that it should.

Q: But wasn't he ticked off at your allegations at that he basically was doing an inept job?

A: Well, I think that there are people out in the field who have done a less-than-adequate job.

Q: I don't understand why any CIA employee would try to cover up information dealing with what is arguably the crime of the century.

A: Well, let me give you a couple of facts that I ascertained and that deeply distressed me. I found out, for example, that there was not a high priority assigned to this particular matter, that indeed, there were, for example the exportation of atomic weapons, etc., was higher, that the Libyans were higher, that the transfer of technical equipment was assigned a higher priority, for example.

Q: Didn't I see you quoted in the newspaper as saying that there was an official at the Rome embassy — a CIA official — who told you that there wasn't one CIA person working on this case? Can that be true?

A: That's correct. And that is true. And, of course, now they say well, you really didn't understand what he said. That really there were seven people over there. He told me — quote-unquote — we don't have anyone specifically assigned. All of our agents have their ears to the ground. But I think more shocking is the fact that here, at this late date, they cannot — the CIA cannot — determine whether or not Antonov, the Bulgarian who was arrested, was an agent or not. Now that is ludicrous. For us not to be able to form an opinion with respect to this Bulgarian, with respect to his activities, whether or not he was an agent? That that question would still be in doubt is something that I find hard to believe.

Q: You met with National Security Adviser William Clark and what did he say about all the things you've said in the press as well as here?

A: I went even further with the judge. There were certain matters which I have not revealed to the press

— information that we were able to gather from various...

Q: You don't want to do it here?

A: Well, no, I'm afraid if I wouldn't do it before, I certainly wouldn't do it now but I did.

Q: Well, that's a silly rule, Senator, I mean you could reveal it with the others, no problem with that... You ought to be dogmatic, really.

A: Let me suggest to you that there also has been an attempt to say that I've looked to capitalize on publicity with regard to this matter and I say, let's look at the record. I came into possession of information which indicated a possible motive back in October 1981.

Q: This is when you went to Rome and met with Vatican officials?

A: When I went to Rome, I met with certain Vatican officials. I did not make that information public. I did not go to the press. I did not hold a press conference. I gave that information to the CIA. And I have to admit to you, I was deeply distressed when I just learned — talk about ineptness — that that information I gave to certain officials here had never been transmitted to ascertain the truth or falsehood of the information to the me.